Reptiles of the NSW Murray Catchment: A Guide to Their Identification, Ecology and Conservation

by Damian Michael and David Lindenmayer

Publisher: *CSIRO Publishing, Collingwood, Victoria, 2010, 248 pages, paperback, colour photographs. ISBN 9780643098206. RRP $39.95*

Reptiles have generally fared better in Australia since European settlement than many of our native mammals, birds and amphibians. Despite this, there are many reptiles we still know very little about that are currently threatened with extinction. Although Australia has a significantly greater diversity of reptiles than most other countries, they are often overlooked or thought of as being of limited value for assessing faunal responses to habitat restoration. This may be due to a perceived lack of habitat specialisation for many species or difficulties in monitoring them. Yet recent studies suggest that some reptiles may show strong positive responses to targeted habitat restoration, something that can often easily be monitored by actively searching or using artificial shelters.

While many reptile guides provide information on topics as broad as collecting, legislation, first aid and captive husbandry, very few provide detailed information relevant to ecological restoration and management aimed at reptile conservation. *Reptiles of the NSW Murray Catchment* is likely to be the first popular Australian reptile guide to do so.

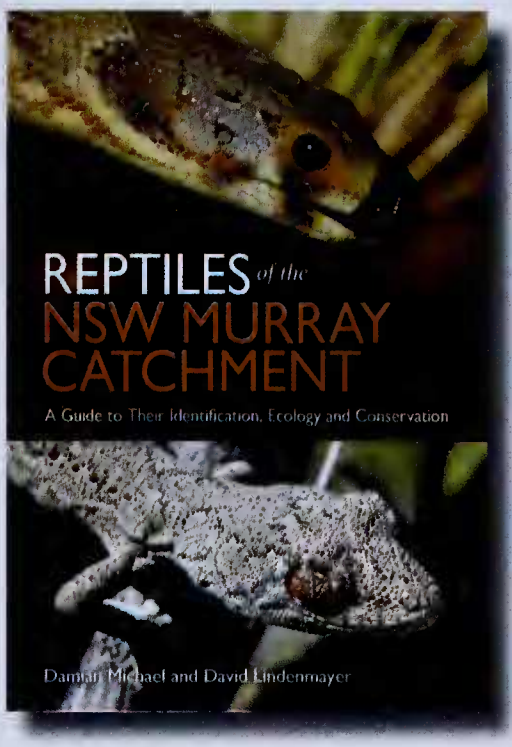
It is important to note that the scope of the book is limited to documenting the reptiles of the south-central NSW Riverina and associated slopes and, while not covering all of the reptiles of the greater Murray-Darling Basin in NSW, it does provide a fairly comprehensive overview of those species with distributions that fall within this smaller sub-region. The region itself covers a diverse range of vegetation communities, from mallee-spinifex woodlands in the west to alpine grasslands and herbfields in the east, resulting in the inclusion of reptiles from over a dozen different habitat types. Although the book is primarily targeted at landholders in the Murray Catchment, many of the basic management actions described may also be applied to other parts of the country.

As the authors acknowledge, the common names used in the book have been selected from prior publications. Some of these names are infrequently used by reptile enthusiasts or may be specific to particular regions. This is not a problem in itself; however, only common names have been used when referring to species in the chapters preceding the species descriptions, requiring constant referral to the index or appendices for readers more familiar with scientific names.

Such is the morphological variation within some reptile species, that some of the key distinguishing features mentioned in the species' descriptions are variable and may not necessarily be representative of every individual, even within the same region. This is an unavoidable reality for many reptile guides, and getting around it would probably significantly add to the length and price of a publication such as this. Although general, wherever possible, the species descriptions are intentionally based on morphological characteristics that may be seen without necessarily having to catch and examine specimens in the hand. In many cases, this avoids the need for specialist knowledge and procedures (and scientific research permits) to identify specimens.

Photographs form an important part of this guide, and most have been carefully selected to show important identifying features or reptiles engaged in interesting behaviours. For several species, more than one photograph is presented, often showing a close-up of the head or other important feature as well as a whole-body shot.

Up-to-date distribution maps for each species include the locations of watercourses and ma-



jor towns in the Murray Catchment, although the locations of some natural and man-made features referred to in the text, such as national parks and major roads, are not shown.

The final chapter deals with the identification of skinks of similar appearance, neatly summarising key identifying features into tables for each genus or group of similar-looking skinks. This provides a quick and easy guide for initial identification, then directing the reader to the species description for more definitive confirmation.

Reptiles of the NSW Murray Catchment draws on a significant amount of detailed local knowledge as well as the broader scientific literature, and although there are a few grammatical errors in places, the text is generally well written and likely to be easily understood by beginning herpetologists as well as land managers and professional ecologists.

David Lindenmayer is a well-known and respected authority in the areas of conservation biology and forest ecology, and this book is a very welcome addition to his ever-growing list of popular publications. For Damian Michael, it offers a wonderful opportunity to share his extensive expertise and knowledge of the region's reptile fauna.

Both authors are to be congratulated for putting together what is overall an outstanding regional guide that will appeal not only to conscientious landholders and managers in the lower Murray Catchment, but to anyone with broad interests in the life history, identification and hands-on conservation of Australian reptiles.

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